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AUTHOR Kean, Michael
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ABSTRACT

The usefulness of tests for college admissions decisions, guidance, and student placement is discussed by a representative of the Educational Testing Service (ETS). Since high school curricula often vary among schools in both content and quality, standardized test scores provide a common measure of applicant performace and indicate a grasp of certain skills, concepts, and knowledge. Test scores combined with other indicators enhance the ability to predict accurately how an applicant is likely to do in a particular institution. Test scores can also be useful to postsecondary institutions' decisions relative to the guidance and placement of students. Guidance profiles can be helpful in identifying students' interests and developing long-range goals. Additionally, test data can help the institution determine what its course offerings should be. ETS is conducting research to identify factors other than academic ability that might influence college admissions decisions. These nonacademic characteristics are personal qualities, some of which are related to different types of success in college. Diagnostic tests, which can be helpful in improving the teaching-learning process, provide information on student progress toward specific learning outcomes. (SW)

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"The Role of Testing in the Process of College Admissions and Student Guidance and Placement"

Statement of Dr. Michael Kean
Director, Midwestern Regional Office
Educational Testing Service
One American Plaza
Evanston, IL 60201

Submitted to

The National Commission
on Excellence in Education

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Since educational institutions and programs differ widely on many dimensions, it is not surprising that admissions requirements for these institutions and programs also vary a great deal. Although the level of selectivity may vary from institution to institution, all colleges need to assess, as accurately as possible, how well the applicants are prepared to meet the institution's standards for postsecondary work. Obviously, those who must make these admissions decisions ought to have the most relevant and highest quality information on each applicant that they can possibly obtain. A combination of objective, instrument-based and impressionistic data on applicants should lead to the most informed decision-making. Both test data as well as information on high school achievement and personal qualities should be considered in admissions decisions.

Standardized tests can be highly useful in the process of making admissions decisions. Since high school curricula often vary from school to school in both content and quality, standardized test scores which represent applicant performance as measured by a common yardstick can be of great value to the admissions process. Properly developed standardized tests offer a valid and reliable measure that is fair to all. Those who take the tests are exposed to the same material. SAT scores from administrations around the world all have the same meaning. Standardized tests scores are an indication of the test-taker's grasp of certain skills, concepts, and knowledge at the time of testing. The tests measure nothing of an individual's identity, economic status, or attitudes.

The best standardized admissions tests are also secure tests. Secure tests ensure that the resulting test scores have credibility and cannot be compromised. This credibility of scores is of the utmost importance to the

admissions decision. Admissions decisions are made on the basis of how well applicants are predicted to be able to handle the academic program of the institution in question. The utilization of all available information for consideration in the admissions decision improves the accuracy of the prediction. Test scores used in combination with other factors enhance the ability to predict accurately how an applicant is most likely to fare in a particular institution.

In addition to their utility in the decision to admit, test scores can also be very useful to postsecondary institutions' decisions relative to the guidance and placement of students. After a student has been admitted to an institution, curriculum planning and placement become of paramount importance. Certainly postsecondary institutions are anxious to develop and utilize guidance profiles for all of their students.

Utilizing such profiles, counselors and other staff can assist students to identify areas of interest as well as to develop long-range goals. Tests are useful estimates of readiness to do the work in certain courses; they can help students to plan rewarding and successful college careers. Properly used test data can also assist an institution in determining what its course offerings should be. Having good diagnostic information on students can aid the institution in determining the most efficient scheduling of its academic resources. Sharing diagnostic test results with students also permits them to better assess their strengths and weaknesses, and to chart their own educational course. Often the judicious use of test scores can provide the basis for consideration of why certain courses may or may not be within a student's present level of mastery--and how that mastery might be improved. Test scores can contribute significantly to the provision of effective counseling of students or potential students.

We at Educational Testing Service (ETS) realize that standardized tests can be very useful to those who must make admissions decisions and to those who must counsel and place students once those decisions have been made. At ETS we are committed to developing the best possible tests and providing those who use our tests with complete and understandable information on both the design aspects of the tests as well as their appropriate uses and interpretations. We are constantly engaging in research to establish as precisely as possible the state of the art in testing, and to ever advance that state.

In addition to our test related activities, ETS has also had a long-term interest in the question of what role the personal qualities of an applicant play in the admissions process. Researchers at ETS have been studying this issue for several years and have looked at a number of factors aside from academic ability that might influence to some extent the admissions decision. In studying the personal qualities issue, ETS researchers reviewed past research including research on the use in the admissions process of biographical data, personal statements, recommendations, interviews, interest measures, personality ratings, and peer ratings. These measures of personal qualities had been researched to a lesser extent than traditional academic measures. The ETS study of personal qualities in college admissions used a limited number of colleges and therefore considerable caution should be exercised in any attempt to generalize the findings of that research to other institutions. The colleges studied have traditionally placed much emphasis on academic performance as reflected in high school grades and test scores. They also consider other nonacademic characteristics of their applicants. These nonacademic characteristics can be designated as personal qualities some of which are judged to be related to different types of success in college, with others being held to be intrinsically important in their own right. The data

collected in the study indicates an important supplementary role for personal qualities in admissions. Additional research on personal qualities and their utility in the admissions process is needed, as increased attention to personal qualities could well enhance the process of making admissions decisions.

In our opinion, the attention of educators and the National Commission on Excellence in Education could best be focused on the issues involved in how to improve learning and instruction. Tests can assist in this improvement. Diagnostic tests can be of the greatest utility in improving the teaching-learning process. Such tests could provide meaningful information on student progress toward clearly defined specific learning outcomes. Diagnostic testing can also be made more efficient by utilizing new technology, e.g. computer-assisted testing, that would facilitate our ability to embed assessment and testing in instruction. This improvement in the quality and efficiency of diagnostic testing would also aid colleges in their efforts to place the increasing numbers of foreign students seeking to enroll in American schools. The design and improvement of tests that will enhance the processes of instruction and placement and guidance rather than only assisting in selection seems to us to be most needed. ETS is committed to working to help meet this need.